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A test of will for the quiet Boland

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WASHINGTON — In the Congressional Directory the biography of Rep. Edward Boland (D-Mass.) takes up three lines, listing the 46 Congresses to which he has been elected. There is nothing else.

It is typical of Boland that he omits his position of power in the House where, behind Chairman Jamie Whitten (D-Miss.) he is the ranking Democrat on the Appropriations Committee.

Nor does he say anything there about his position as chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, where he has sat, across from the President and said "no" to proposed Central Intelligence Agency covert operations abroad.

This piece of information comes not from Boland, who never discusses with the press the substance of the committee's business, but from other committee members who have seen Boland in action.

Now Boland finds himself in the center of a storm. It involves President Reagan's Central American policies, the CIA's activities there, Boland's power as chairman of the House Intelligence Committee to say "no" to the CIA's covert operations, and the possibility of President Reagan breaking the law.

And unlike past episodes, it is a public fight. The President will go before a joint session of Congress tonight to make his case. Boland, in a rare response, is making a public statement saying that the "evidence is very strong" that the Administration has given covert aid to Nicaraguan rebels to fight the Sandinista government there and thus has violated the law.

There is a sizable body of opinion in the House that the President is reaching over the heads of Congress to go to the American people and that the Congress in this instance is just a useful prop. "If he wanted to address the problem with the Congress, he could have held a secret briefing session," said a Democratic member. "But he knows he is in trouble there."

Another aide associated with the thinking of the leadership, when asked what the President might do to change things, said, "There is really

not much new he can say. He will probably scare people with the Libyan business [Libyan planes headed for Nicaragua were searched in Brazil and found to contain Soviet and American weapons], he will emphasize the elections in El Salvador [none in Nicaragua] and the threat of Soviet domination and that we have got to clean up our act."

Another Democratic member, asked if Reagan could make the John Kennedy missile crisis appeal of 1963, said, "No way. There is no direct Soviet involvement; there are no offensive missiles being installed in Nicaragua and there is no Kennedy."

But the Administration has been raising the ante for some time. US Ambassador to Mexico John Gavin lashed out at the press, saying that it is attaching great significance to the 55 US advisers in El Salvador, "never mind that there are several thousand [Cuban and East bloc] military advisers in Nicaragua. And 40,000 Cuban troops in Angola and Ethiopia."

He cited the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and US weapons which fell into the hands of the North Vietnamese now turning up in rebel hands in El Salvador. "Those facts," said Gavin, "seem to be discarded."

This is the position which the President is expected to take in his speech tonight.

And Boland will have to make some kind of reply. The issue before the House is not justification for the covert action but rather whether the covert action is illegal.

In 1974, in the aftermath of Vietnam, Congress passed a law that its intelligence committees be notified of covert action. The House and Senate committees were aware of the action throughout Central America a year ago and in December, knowing this, Congress passed the Boland amendment which prohibited the use of CIA covert action to overthrow the government in Nicaragua.

The Senate's Intelligence Committee chairman, Barry Goldwater, said there is nothing wrong with what the United States is doing.

But the President will be challenging Boland's statement. Boland is not Goldwater, who was considered zany even by the standards of the Nixon Administration. Boland is a member of the institution. If he insists that the Administration has gone beyond the law, it will have great force in the House.

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